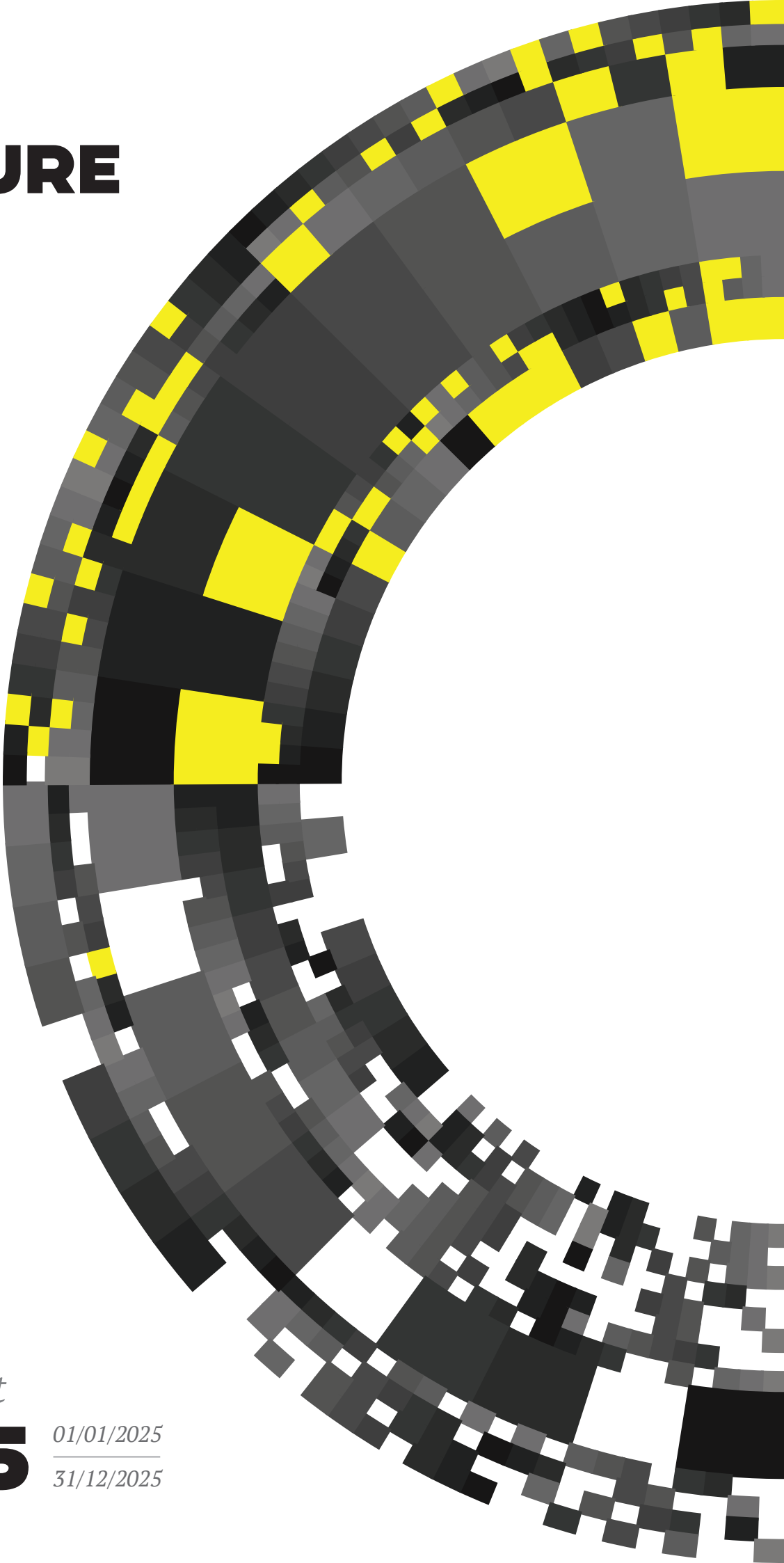


# OPEN \_FUTURE



*annual report*

**2025**

*01/01/2025*

*31/12/2025*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This annual report covers the fifth year of Open Future's operations. 2025 was the year when the European policy landscape we work in shifted significantly. The debate moved from regulation to investment and infrastructure, the theme of digital sovereignty became central, and questions about AI's relationship to the knowledge commons surfaced across various online ecosystems.

Our strategic framework, built over the preceding four years around the concepts of Digital Commons, Public Digital Infrastructure, and the Paradox of Open, positioned us well to respond to this shift. Rather than pivoting to new territory, we found that the questions now at the center of European policy debates were questions we had been working on for years.

We want to begin by highlighting several key achievements from the last year:

1. We defined the policy framework for Public AI in Europe. Our [white paper on Public AI](#), published with the Bertelsmann Stiftung, made the case for treating AI as public digital infrastructure. The argument gained traction across EU institutions and shaped the terms of [the European policy debate on public investments in AI](#). Alongside it, we began building a coalition with open source AI developers, and conducted exploratory work on a [European Books Data Commons](#) with major European libraries.
2. The white paper [Beyond AI and Copyright](#), our most popular publication this year, advanced a new framing: that the challenge posed by AI to the information ecosystem goes beyond questions of rights and compensation toward a broader concern with the sustainability of original content production. This work laid the foundation for our emerging line of work on sustainable information ecosystems.
3. We were one of the leading civic voices in debates on digital sovereignty, focusing on how digital commons contribute to this goal. As the policy lead for the [NGI Commons](#) consortium, we published [A Strategic Agenda for Digital Commons](#), the first concrete roadmap for EU investment in digital commons as foundational public infrastructure. Our work on [research and innovation funding](#) fed into the debate on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, where we were among the most visible voices arguing that the digital public space cannot be fixed by regulation alone.
4. The [CommonsDB project](#), our first work on a technical solution for the knowledge commons, moved from design to implementation. We launched the CommonsDB Explorer, a tool that allows users to retrieve rights information for digital works based on content fingerprinting. This lets anyone verify the rights status of a digital work. By early 2026, the system had ingested over 700,000 rights declarations from our data partners, demonstrating an operational, decentralized rights registry.
5. We secured funding from Collaborative AI for a new line of work: [Steering AI investment](#), which examines how public investment, private capital, and industrial lobbying shape AI development in Europe. This represents a strategic expansion of our advocacy capacity,

applying a critical lens to the funding architecture that will determine whether European AI serves the public interest or merely reproduces existing power structures.

## **2. OUR STRATEGY**

Our strategy continues to be based on our original objectives and the guiding principle of leveraging openness to design and build systems that maximize the societal benefits of information resources in the networked information economy. These objectives, developed over our first four years, proved especially well-suited to the policy environment that emerged in 2025.

In 2025, we continued working on the three previously identified strategic objectives that guide our work:

1. **Digital Public Space:** to advance the idea that the online environment should entail digital public spaces governed by a different logic than the commercial internet, based on Public Digital Infrastructures governed democratically and sustainably.
2. **Digital Commons:** to develop civil society strategies and policies for cultivating resources shared in the public interest, governed democratically, and collectively overseen. This approach provides a viable alternative to the traditional proprietary ownership model.
3. **Paradox of Open:** to develop an updated theory of action for the open movement aimed at leveraging openness to design and build systems that maximize the societal benefits of information resources in the networked information economy—particularly by supporting digital commons solutions.

In 2025, on the basis of this framework, we launched three significant new lines of work:

- our research and advocacy on Public AI, which applies the public digital infrastructure vision to the AI domain;
- our exploration of Sustainable Information Ecosystems, which extends our copyright and creative labor work toward a broader concern with the health of knowledge production in an AI-shaped environment;
- and the Steering AI Investment project, which examines how public and private capital flows shape AI development in Europe and beyond.

For each objective, we have aimed to strengthen the open movement's strategic advocacy capacity by advancing advocacy, conducting research, building narratives, and developing shared advocacy goals. We also aimed to establish new alliances and partnerships. For example, our work on Sustainable Information Ecosystems is done in close collaboration with partners in media and news sectors, and our Public AI work depends on partnerships with technical experts and open source AI developers. Finally, we have strived to be the voice expressing a public interest position in debates often dominated by commercial interests.

We continue focusing on European policymaking and advocating for a unique approach to digital policies with Digital Commons and Public Digital Infrastructures at their heart. At the same time, we see these debates as crucial for broader, global policy conversations. In 2025, this included such issues as digital sovereignty, public investment in AI, transparency of AI systems or alternative social networks. In each case, European conversations and experiences have relevance for policies across the world. For this reason, we have also selectively engaged in policy debates and spaces beyond the European Union.

## **3. IMPACT**

In this section, we provide an overview of the impact of the activities we have undertaken last year. The list of activities described is not exhaustive and is meant to highlight the activities that made the greatest impact in advancing our strategic objectives.

### ***3.1. Public AI***

In 2025, [Public AI](#) emerged as a major new line of work for Open Future, building on our earlier work on Public Digital Infrastructure and responding to the growing concentration of power in the AI ecosystem. Our work has focused on developing the conceptual and policy framework for public AI, building coalitions of European actors working in this space, and engaging directly with EU policymakers.

In collaboration with the Bertelsmann Stiftung, we published a white paper on public AI titled [Public AI: A Public Alternative to Private AI Dominance](#), released in May 2025. The paper proposes treating AI as public digital infrastructure, organized around three core pillars: universal and non-discriminatory access, mission-driven public goals, and public control. Building on the white paper, we started working at the end of the year on a [European Public AI Policy Brief](#), published at the very start of 2026. This brief translated the more conceptual white paper into concrete policy recommendations for the European Commission.

Throughout 2025, we contributed to building a network of European public AI advocates through coordination with AI research institutions (Fraunhofer, Barcelona Supercomputing Center), experts, and civil society organizations. This resulted with the publication of [an open letter on copyright and other legal challenges](#) faced by European open source AI developers. The letter received a response from the Commission acknowledging the concerns and referencing the upcoming review of the Copyright in the Digital Single Market Directive. We also co-organized a session on public AI at Mozfest 2025, together with a workshop on training data for open source AI, at the Barcelona Supercomputing Center.

We also conducted work related to commons as a source of training data. Work on the European Books Data Commons (EBDC) involved a series of structured conversations with European libraries, with the goal of exploring how they could collectively make their digitized public domain book collections available. This resulted with the publication of an [Outline for a European Books Data Commons](#). In addition, we published two reports by our fellows:

[“Governing the scholarly AI Commons”](#) by Samuel A. Moore and [“Lessons for the global transition to equitable Open Access to research”](#) by Melissa Hagemann.

In the second half of 2025, we also began a new collaboration with [Wikimedia CH](#) on the intersection of the Wikimedia movement and generative AI. In November, we co-organized a roundtable in Lausanne together with Wikimedia CH and IMD Business School, titled [“Collective Intelligence vs Artificial Intelligence”](#). A [report from the roundtable](#) maps key challenges and argues for the need for Wikimedia to define its position in the emerging “new knowledge loop” between human knowledge production and AI systems. Building on its findings, we began work on a white paper with Wikimedia CH that will propose a strategic framework for the Wikimedia movement’s engagement with AI.

Over the course of the year, our public AI work increasingly intersected with related workstreams. The questions of data access for European model builders connected directly to our ongoing work on copyright and TDM implementation. The concept of public AI infrastructure informed our work on sustainable information ecosystems, and development of public AI in Europe will be further investigated by us through the Steering AI investment project.

### ***3.2 AI and Creative Labor***

Our work on [AI and Creative Labour](#) in 2025 developed along two related but distinct lines: a practical effort to create the technical conditions for the EU’s AI and copyright framework to function as intended, and a longer-term inquiry into whether that framework is, on its own, adequate to sustain a healthy information ecosystem.

The centrepiece of the first line of work—supported by the European AI and Society Fund—was our deepening engagement with the [IETF standardisation process for machine-readable AI preferences](#). In April, Paul Keller was appointed an editor of the [IETF working group draft on a vocabulary for AI preferences](#) (based on the proposal in our March 2025 brief [A Vocabulary for Opting Out from AI Training and Other Forms of TDM](#)), and over the course of the year four additional working group drafts have been published. The motivation for this engagement is direct: the TDM opt-out framework established by the CDSM Directive is only operationally meaningful if there is a reliable, machine-readable mechanism through which rights reservations can be expressed and interpreted by AI systems at scale.

In January 2026, we published [Divergent Mechanisms, Elusive Vocabularies: The State of Machine-Readable Rights Reservations](#), providing an analysis of the state of opt-out and AI preference signalling at the end of 2025. Our engagement with the AI preferences working group will continue in 2026, providing much needed representation of the EU civil society perspective in discussions dominated by big tech and big publishing interests.

The second part of our work in this area reflects a concern that has grown alongside this practical engagement: that even a well-functioning copyright framework may not be sufficient to address the structural challenges that AI-scale use of human-generated content poses to the information ecosystem. We pursued a more exploratory strand of research aimed at reframing the debate, and at moving beyond questions of rights and compensation.

We published an initial version of this argument in our June 2025 white paper [Beyond AI and Copyright](#). This closely connects concerns about the financial sustainability of the public information ecosystem with our advocacy for investment in [public AI infrastructure](#). In the second half of the year we refined the argument based on extensive stakeholder feedback—including a mini-conference on [sustaining original content in the age of AI](#) that we co-hosted with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Future of Work. A more targeted policy proposition will guide our AI and copyright policy work in 2026.

### ***3.3. Copyright Infrastructure***

In 2025, our long-standing work on [Copyright Infrastructure](#) transitioned from theoretical exploration to practical implementation with the launch of [CommonsDB](#), a collaborative project funded by the European Commission to build a prototype registry for Public Domain and openly licensed works. The project addresses a core challenge of the digital age: the difficulty of verifying, at scale, the legal status of a work and the conditions under which it can be used.

We lead the project as the coordinator of a consortium that includes [Liccium](#), [Europeana Foundation](#), [Wikimedia Sverige](#), and the [Institute for Information Law](#) (IViR). The initiative focuses on creating a decentralised infrastructure that uses International Standard Content Codes (ISCC) and verifiable credentials to link digital assets with rights information.

In June, we published the [first part](#) of the CommonsDB Feasibility Study. Developed in collaboration with IViR, this report outlined the conceptual framework and IViR's legal analysis for the registry, establishing the necessary design principles for a trusted copyright infrastructure. Throughout the second half of the year, the consortium focused on the technical implementation of these principles, moving from design to active testing.

In September, we organized a technical and legal workshop to explore the registry's potential role in the AI training landscape. Convening stakeholders such as [Creative Commons](#), [Pleias](#), and the [Common Crawl Foundation](#), we examined how CommonsDB could support lawful, traceable data sourcing for AI models. The [discussions](#) highlighted that while the project's core mission remains focused on Public Domain and openly licensed works, the registry's asset-level approach to rights information provides a useful foundation for improving provenance and transparency in AI training datasets.

In November, we presented the progress of the initiative at the [GLAM Wiki 2025 conference](#), the [CommonsDB Explorer](#) went live. The tool provides a visual interface that allows users to retrieve rights information by dropping a digital file directly into the browser—without relying on embedded metadata. Because the lookup is based on content fingerprinting rather than file metadata, it remains functional even when metadata has been stripped from a work, enabling robust attribution chains for works circulating online.

The work undertaken in 2025 culminated in the publication of the [second part](#) of the feasibility study in January 2026. This report confirmed the operational viability of the prototype against the design principles established in Part 1, which by early 2026 had successfully ingested over 700,000 rights declarations from our data partners.

### ***3.4. Public Digital Infrastructure***

In 2025, our work on [Public Digital Infrastructure](#) and Digital Commons placed us at the center of Europe's digital sovereignty debate. As we continued to lead the policy work for the [Next Generation Internet \(NGI\) Commons](#) consortium, we aimed to highlight how the Digital Commons can play a key role in [securing Europe's sovereignty](#), and to translate this position into EU's institutional reality. Building on our previous research and advocacy work, we also continued engaging with European Commission's industrial policy, including the European Competitiveness Fund and [the Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (MFF).

The year's flagship publication, [A Strategic Agenda for Digital Commons](#), offered a roadmap for EU institutions and member states on how to design public digital infrastructure designed as a commons. The focus was on specific funding proposals that can be included in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. We proposed five key interventions related to funding research and innovation, developing cloud infrastructure, leveraging public procurement, investing in Digital Public Spaces and creating the Digital Commons European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (DC EDIC). The Strategic Agenda was based on a research study titled [From Open Access to Collective Governance](#), which mapped two decades of EU policies in support of the Digital Commons. We also published a policy brief [From Public Investment to Public Value](#), which outlined five concrete policy interventions aimed at leveraging the 2028–2034 MFF as a catalyst for advancing Europe's digital sovereignty. Our other analyses and publications concerned [Research and Innovation funding for digital technologies](#), and [chips development in EU's industrial strategy](#).

Our research fellow Mila Samdub wrote the report [“Digital Public Infrastructure at a turning point”](#), offering a typology of the various definitions and an analysis of motivations attached to DPIs worldwide.

Alongside research, we actively engaged in EU policy debates: we took part in the MFF consultation, the Cloud and AI Development Act consultation, and the Digital Decade review, each time anchoring our arguments in the public interest case for Digital Commons. We also co-organized [the Digital Commons Policy Summit](#) (20-21 November in Brussels), which brought together policymakers, public authorities, technologists, and open source communities to discuss how Europe can strategically scale Digital Commons as foundational infrastructure for digital sovereignty.

### ***3.5 Steering AI investment***

A major development in 2025 was securing funding from Collaborative AI for a new line of work: [Steering AI Investment](#). It examines how public investment, private capital, and industrial lobbying shape AI development across Europe and the world.

With funding secured, we laid the groundwork for implementation in the final months of 2025. Initial activities included collaboration with the Belgian media outlet Apache, looking into Belgian public spending on AI. This is meant as an early proof of concept for the model that

connects us with journalists and will contribute to this line of work going forward. We also launched the [AI Action Plan Observatory](#) on our website, a prototype for a more complete work on mapping the European AI investment architecture, which we will conduct in 2026.

## **4. COMMUNICATION**

Our website remains our primary publishing platform, supported by active engagement on LinkedIn, Mastodon, and BlueSky, and a monthly newsletter. In 2025, we continued to adapt our channel mix to a changing social media landscape, concentrating our efforts on the platforms where our audiences are most active.

### *4.1. Publishing and dissemination*

In 2025, we published 16 publications and 38 blog posts, maintaining a steady rhythm of analysis and commentary on digital policy. Website traffic grew 14% year on year, reaching more than 65,000 visits. Our newsletter grew from 1,092 to 1,289 subscribers over the year, an 18% increase, while sustaining an average open rate above 50%. [Beyond AI and Copyright](#) was the most visited page on the site for four consecutive months, breaking traffic records set in 2024. We also published pieces in [Tech Policy Press](#), [Tagesspiegel](#), [OECD's The AI Wonk](#), and [EU Observer](#).

A significant communications milestone in 2025 was completing our newsletter redesign, informed by reader feedback. In the first full quarter under the new format, click-through rates improved, reaching up to 7.6% in November, suggesting stronger reader engagement with the new design.

On social media, [LinkedIn](#) grew 26% over the year to nearly 7,800 followers. [BlueSky](#), launched in late 2024, nearly quadrupled to almost 700 followers by year-end. And [Mastodon](#) grew steadily to 1,791 followers.

### *4.2. Events and Public Speaking*

In 2025, we maintained an active presence at policy events, conferences, and workshops across Europe. Key events that we organized or co-organized included the [Digital Commons Policy Summit](#) in Brussels (co-organized as part of the NGI Commons project), a mini-conference on [sustaining original content in the age of generative AI](#) (co-hosted with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung); a CommonsDB workshop at the [GLAM Wiki 2025 conference](#); the ["Collective Intelligence vs Artificial Intelligence" roundtable](#) in Lausanne, co-organized with Wikimedia CH and IMD Business School; and a Civil Society Organizations roundtable on digital sovereignty at the Digital Summit in Gdańsk (organized with Panoptykon, Mozilla and Open Markets Institute).

We presented our work at major community and policy events, including [MozFest 2025](#) in Barcelona (November), where Alek co-led a session on public AI alongside Mozilla and the Barcelona Supercomputing Center, French [Numerique en Communs](#) conference, [Europeana](#)

[workshop on AI and cultural heritage](#) organized as part of Danish EU Presidency, [Ars Electronica](#) in Linz, the [PublicSpaces](#) conference in Amsterdam, and [RightsCon](#) in Taipei.

## 5. ORGANIZATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

In 2025, we hired two new members of our team. Douglas McCarthy joined as Senior Open Content Specialist working on the CommonsDB project, and Aditya Singh joined as Senior Policy Analyst, with a focus on our Digital Commons work and the NGI Commons project. This resulted in a stable team of six members, led by the three co-directors.

We continue functioning as a remote team and aim to meet, on average, every two months for meetings that focus on planning, strategy, and team integration.

This year, we finished the fellowships of Melissa Hagemann and Sam Moore, with Mila Samdub continuing to be our fellow throughout the year. We also made a decision to end our external fellowship program, focusing instead on closer collaboration with selected experts, on key activities. This is based on an evaluation of the current fellowship model, where work proposed by our fellows was not closely enough connected with our core topics.

### 5.1. Sustainability

We are committed to running Open Future in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. Our operation as a remote organization allowed us to produce relatively few emissions that would be directly related to our daily operations<sup>1</sup>.

Our most relevant sources of emissions are those related to travel by team members for either team meetings or in-person events attendance. To minimize the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions generated by travel, we follow our travel policy, which encourages rail travel over other means of transportation,<sup>2</sup> and requires us to track and compensate for travel-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Furthermore, all international travel is reviewed by the directors, with the aim of reducing the amount of travel that we do.

By implementing such a policy, in 2025 we caused the following CO<sub>2</sub> emissions<sup>3</sup> by travel undertaken by our team members. The amounts of saved CO<sub>2</sub> account for train trips where the duration is longer than 5 hours calculated as the difference between emissions for train and air travel:

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<sup>1</sup> To minimize the emissions related to the products or services we consume, we select, wherever possible, vendors that provide carbon-neutral products or services—such as our hosting provider, [greenhost](#).

<sup>2</sup> By banning air travel for trips that take 5 hours or less by train and encouraging rail travel by paying for first-class train tickets for trips longer than 300 km.

<sup>3</sup> Calculation based on search results returned by [ecopassenger.org](#).

Type	Number of Trips	CO <sub>2</sub> emitted (in kg)	CO <sub>2</sub> saved (in kg)
Air travel	32	10035	0
Rail Travel	49	1740	636
<b>Total</b>	81	11775	636

An uptake both in the number of trips and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, compared with 2024, is mainly due to the fact that we had a slightly bigger team in 2025. The amount of rail travel stayed constant, while the number of air travel trips increased by 33%.

## 6. FINANCIAL

After the end of the fourth year Arcadia grant that helped launch Open Future, 2025 was the first year when we worked without a major structural contribution to our budget. By steadily diversifying our funding base, already in previous years, we have been able to maintain our operations at the same level as in the preceding years.

In 2025, our total expenses have again increased from €572.286 to €622.158. This amounts to a 9% increase year over year, which was mainly due to the expansion of our team for the CommonsDB project. This falls short of the € 700.000 budget target that we had formulated for 2025. As outlined above, we have nevertheless managed to achieve the objectives formulated in our 2025 workplan. In 2025 we have realized €630.439 in income. The resulting positive result of €8.281 has been added to our general reserve.

In the following section, we will highlight the key differences between the 2025 budget and our actual spending in 2025.

### 6.1. Budget vs. Actual

The following table provides an overview of budget versus actual expenses during 2025. Our overall budget projected expenses of € 700.000 and income to match. Of this income, € 395.000 was pledged at the beginning of the year, and the remaining € 305.000 was a fundraising goal.

Our total expenses (€ 622.158) are 11% below the budget target. This is largely due to underspending on activity costs, which are explained in the next section. Our 2025 income is composed of the following sources:

- € 125.000 from our 2023-2026 Open Society Foundations operations grant,
- € 162.222 in contribution from the NGI Commons project (Horizon Europe)
- € 122.839 EU contribution to the CommonsDB project
- A € 95.000 grant from the Stichting Internet Archive Europe for our work on Public AI

- A € 46.375 grant from the European AI and Society Fund for our work on AI and Creative labour
- € 34.400 from Wikimedia Switzerland for our work on Public AI
- € 15.000 from Stiftung Bertelsmann for our work on Public AI
- € 23.032 in smaller grants <= €10.000 for various lines of work

In addition, we have also received € 6.569 in interest in 2025.

	2025 (Budget)	2025 (Actual)
<b>Expenses</b>	<b>€ 700.000</b>	<b>€ 622.158</b>
Personnel Costs	€ 562.000	€ 542.566
Activity Costs	€ 103.000	€ 51.358
Overhead Costs	€ 35.000	€ 28.234
<b>Income</b>	<b>€ 700.000</b>	<b>€ 630.439</b>
Open Society Foundations	€ 125.000	€ 125.000
NGI Commons	€150.000	€ 162.222
CommonsDB	€120.000	€ 122.839
Internet Archive Europe	€ 0	€ 95.000
Other (see above)	0	€125.377
To raise	€305.000	€0

## 6.2. Outlook & Sustainability

In 2025, we have demonstrated that we are able to fund Open Future without the structural contribution from the Arcadia fund, which had given us a significant amount of financial stability in the first four years of operations. We have managed to fill the gap left by Arcadia through a combination of EU research funding (NGI Commons and CommonsDB), a more substantial draw from our Open Society Foundations Grant, and more efforts on fundraising from smaller contributors.

In 2026, we will continue to rely on a similar mix of funding sources, including a significant multi-year grant from the AI collaborative for our Steering AI work. Based on this, we have adopted a 2026 operating budget that foresees operating expenses of €730.000 against €544.000 of secured income at the beginning of the year. We are confident that we can raise the remaining funds.

## ABOUT OPEN FUTURE

[Open Future](#) is a European think tank that develops new approaches to an open internet that maximize societal benefits of shared data, knowledge and culture.



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